

Sorting it out
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Remote recitals
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Methow Valley News

PUBLISHED WEEKLY SINCE 1903 TWISP, WASHINGTON VOL. 117 NO. 33 WWW.METHOWVALLEYNEWS.COM December 16, 2020 \$1

County Prosecutor Arian Noma resigns

Cites inadequate funding, racial attacks

BY MARCY STAMPER

Okanogan County Prosecutor Arian Noma has submitted his resignation as of Jan. 15, 2021, halfway through his first four-year term.

Noma informed the Okanogan County commissioners of his decision in a brief, one-sentence letter on Dec. 10 simply stating he was resigning.

But Noma provided substantially more context in a three-page letter to "Citizens," in which he detailed his accomplishments and his frustrations — primarily with what he described as insufficient money to do his job. Noma also said that he was leaving because of "racially motivated attacks" that made him fear for his and his family's safety.

In accordance with the state constitution, the Okanogan County Republican Party will submit three nominees to the county commissioners, who will review their credentials and conduct interviews before making a selection to fill Noma's unexpired term, Okanogan County

Human Resources Director Tanya Craig said. The next election is in 2022 and the appointee would have to run and win to remain in the position, she said.

Noma, a Republican, ran in 2018 on a platform of reforming the county's justice system, including what he called "over-criminalization" of minor infractions, particularly for young people, and excessive bail. Noma defeated Brandon Platter, a Democrat who had been appointed to fill the seat of the previous prosecutor after he resigned to take another job.

In his letter to the citizens, Noma pointed to successes under his leadership. The Prosecutor's Office redefined its approach to charging decisions, focusing more on rehabilitation than punishment for non-violent crimes, he said.

The office eliminated excessive fees that made it difficult for people who had served their sentences to remove themselves from the criminal system even after their cases were concluded. The office cleared many case backlogs at the District and Superior court levels. They caught up with appeals by people convicted of major crimes, winning all of them, Noma said.

Nonetheless, Noma said his office

faced many challenges because of inadequate funding, exacerbated by the temporary shutdown of jury trials during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the office once again faces a backlog of cases, he said.

"The growing backlog leads to a primary purpose of writing this letter, which is to inform you that Okanogan County's budget crisis is one of the most pressing dilemmas and threats to public safety," Noma said. Noma said the Prosecutor's Office needs at least seven more attorneys and three more support staff to carry out their duties.

The county's two Superior Court deputy prosecutors each have more than 100 cases at a time — right now, one has 242 open cases and the other has 140, Noma said. Noma handles serious crimes and homicides himself.

"I have repeatedly asked for additional funds to do this service, but unfortunately that has not materialized. To be clear, it is not fair to our client, the Okanogan Public, to only have three trial deputies to handle the job requiring at least five. I cannot ethically consent to 'business as usual'

See **NOMA**, A2

ICE PALACE

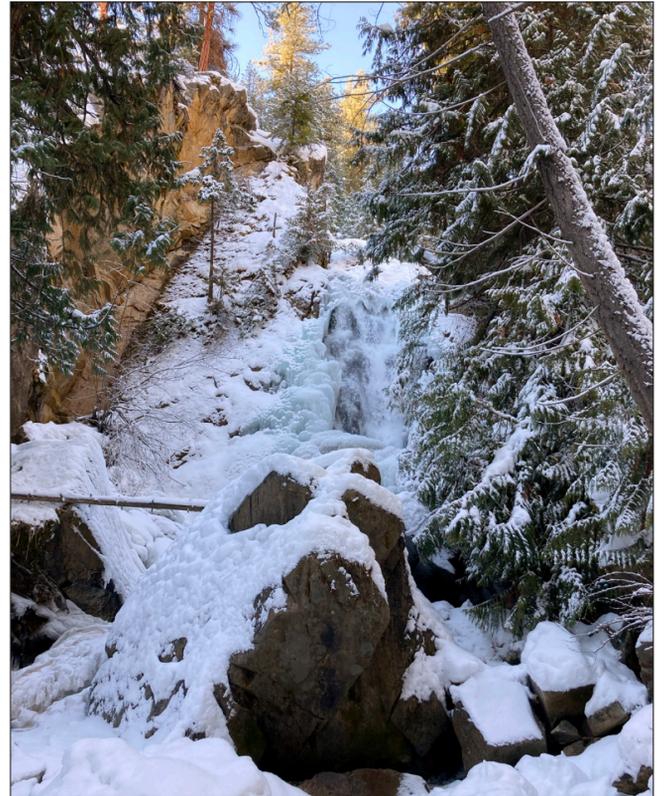


Photo by Marcy Stamper

Winter has sculpted Falls Creek Falls into an architectural sensation.

COVID-19 vaccines expected this week

Health care workers are first priority

BY ANN MCCREARY

COVID-19 vaccinations for front-line health care workers in Okanogan County could begin this week, after the vaccine begins arriving at health care institutions in the county approved to be among the first recipients of the vaccine in Washington.

"We don't have an ETA, but are expecting them [vaccines] early this week," John McReynolds, CEO of North Valley Hospital, said Monday (Dec. 14). "We will begin vaccinations in earnest the next day."

North Valley Hospital in Tonasket, Family Health Centers, headquartered in Omak, and Three Rivers Hospital in Brewster have been approved by the Washington Department of Health (DOH) to receive and distribute the COVID-19 vaccine. Three Rivers was notified last Saturday (Dec. 12) that it was approved as a vaccine site. North Valley Hospital and Family Health Centers were notified the previous week.

A vaccine developed by U.S. company Pfizer and German company BioNTech got federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA) emergency use authorization last week and began shipping across the country from Pfizer's facility in Michigan on Sunday (Dec. 13). The vaccine began arriving in Washington on Monday.

Health care workers at high risk of exposure to COVID-19, staff and residents of long-term care facilities, and high-risk first responders are prioritized as the first people



Photo courtesy of Washington Department of Health/Seattle Times
The first shipment of COVID-19 vaccine arrived at the University of Washington Medical Center in Seattle this week.

to receive the vaccine, under state and federal guidelines. Washington health officials estimate that about 500,000 people will be eligible for the vaccine in this first phase.

James Wallace, chief health officer for Family Health Centers, said his organization, which operates medical and dental clinics in Twisp and five other communities in Okanogan County, is waiting to learn when its first vaccine shipment will arrive.

"It appears from a call this morning and discussions with community partners that hospitals are receiving priority for distribution from DOH at this point," Wallace said Tuesday (Dec. 15) in an email. "North Valley Hospital is receiving vaccines this week and working on logistics

for administration. Three Rivers Hospital will receive vaccine in two weeks."

Direct shipments

The vaccine is being shipped directly from Pfizer to providers enrolled in the state vaccination program, said Danielle Koenig of DOH.

North Valley Hospital and other health care providers have been planning for vaccine distribution through a regional workgroup that includes Okanogan County Public Health, hospitals, clinics, nursing homes and emergency management services (EMS), McReynolds said in an email.

See **VACCINE**, A3

Okanogan County's COVID cases still trending upward

Holiday gatherings, travel blamed for latest surge

BY MARCY STAMPER

Okanogan County saw a sharp increase in COVID cases this week, with 121 new cases — 12 in the Methow Valley — as of Sunday (Dec. 13). The new infections validate predictions by public health officials of more infections coming out of the Thanksgiving weekend. Case investigations have traced most recent COVID infections to holiday gatherings and to travel in and out of the county and state, Okanogan County Public Health said.

The new cases bring the county's infection rate per 100,000 population in the past two weeks to 404. Two weeks ago the rate was 253. Sixteen deaths from COVID at North Valley Extended Care in Tonasket more than doubled the county's losses, bringing total deaths to 31.

Clinics and hospitals are taking steps to provide necessary care while protecting their patients and staff. Since most critical-access hospitals, like those in Okanogan County, don't have ICUs, they can help by taking less-critical patients from larger hospitals like Central Washington Hospital

in Wenatchee, said Afton May, director of quality at Mid-Valley Hospital in Omak. Three Rivers Hospital in Brewster has accepted half a dozen patients from Central Washington in their extended-recovery phase, spokesperson Jennifer Best said.

As of Monday (Dec. 15), Central Washington Hospital had 33 COVID patients, seven in the ICU. Four are from Okanogan County.

All hospitals in the county have created a separate wing to isolate COVID patients and staff so they can care for people with other conditions, May said. Mid-Valley can only accept six COVID patients at a time.

Three Rivers generally transfers very sick COVID patients to another facility. The hospital has also been able to send many people who came to the emergency room with respiratory symptoms home to recover, giving them pulse oximeters to monitor their oxygen levels, Best said.

Family Health Centers in Twisp has postponed some wellness visits to minimize risk to employees and the community, physician Allison Fitzgerald said. The clinic is still providing essential care for people with chronic health conditions, and people can get vaccinations at quick appointments with a nurse. Clinic staff are using the carport to see people with COVID symptoms.

See **COVID**, A3



Photo by Marcy Stamper

The Liberty Bell High School jazz band still rehearses outside. A mask can get in the way when playing trumpet, 10th-grader Madison Strauss said.

Playing for time

Teachers, students improvise to keep music alive

BY MARCY STAMPER

The special masks for musicians and bell covers for wind instruments finally arrived the day after the first snowfall.

The hardy group of students in the Liberty Bell High School jazz band were rehearsing outside, doing their best to keep their fingers moving and their instruments in tune. "We toughed it out in the snow," Liberty Bell music teacher David Mills said.

Mills spent the summer and fall researching safe ways for students who attend school in person to actually play music together. This term, the jazz band includes students who play flute, trumpet, trombone, tenor sax, guitar, accordion, violin and percussion, requiring a variety of approaches.

If you're playing guitar, drums, violin or accordion, wearing a mask doesn't interfere with making music. But wind players have been under special restrictions because of the role of small aerosol particles in transmitting COVID-19.

Mills looked far and wide for masks that would offer adequate protection for wind players. He finally found triple-

layer masks and bell covers that help keep the air from escaping from a company in Texas that was scrambling to fill orders. The masks and bell covers have a special filter that absorbs 90% of the aerosols, Mills said.

The masks have a slit for the mouthpiece, tailored to each instrument. They can be especially tricky for flute players, who blow air across the tone hole, not into it.

The flute masks have two wires, which you have to position just right, especially to play low notes, said 11th-grader Hazel CulpSmith. "It kind of blocks the air flow," said ninth-grade

See **MUSIC**, A2

ADDRESS LABEL

THURS.	FRI.	SAT.	SUN.	MON.	TUES.
Dec 17	Dec 18	Dec 19	Dec 20	Dec 21	Dec 22
37°	35°	38°	42°	37°	31°
27°	29°	33°	31°	25°	17°
Mostly cloudy	Night shower	Rain and drizzle	Mostly cloudy	Possible snow	Flurries possible

WEATHER DATA BASED ON ACCUWEATHER.COM FORECAST FOR TWISP

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MUSIC

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flutist Glacier Gilbert, although she's getting used to it.

The mask also gets in the way when playing the trumpet because of a pesky flap that interferes with your embouchure and lip, 10th-grader Madison Strauss said. It also causes condensation to build up, making the mouthpiece so slick that it keeps moving around.

Saxophone players have it easier, since you don't have to control the flow of breath as carefully, said ninth-grader Peyton Lidey.

The hardest part about playing the guitar outside is that

you can't keep it in tune — or move your fingers, 10th-grader Ilo Curtis said. The cold has also caused strings to snap.

The thick bell covers muffle the sound a bit, particularly for brass instruments, Mills said. But the students are adapting. "They're taking to the challenge really well," he said.

Even with the masks — and the cold weather — students are playing outdoors to maximize rehearsal time, often keeping the 20-foot distance they used before they got the masks. Despite a special ventilation system in the classroom and windows wide open, there's still a 30-minute limit on playing indoors.

Next term, there will be more

music options. Mills will be teaching ukulele, for anyone from beginners to experienced guitar players. The school is also exploring a class in steel drums.

More music

Students at Methow Valley Elementary School are also getting a chance to make music. Elementary music teacher Mark Johnson is teaching fourth- and fifth-graders, concentrating on drumming and xylophone. But he's staying away from singing and wind instruments because he wants to see how things go during the winter — with both flu and COVID — before adding more classes.

For larger ensembles — particularly with wind play-

ers — ensuring enough room between musicians and mitigating the moist, warm air that circulates in an enclosed space is still a challenge, Johnson said.

String teacher Pam Hunt has taken advantage of the learning pods set up on Wednesdays for her fifth- and sixth-graders, who are studying violin, viola and cello. In the warmer weather, they met outdoors, wearing masks and sitting far apart. When it got too cold for the students — and the instruments — they moved into the gym, where they could still spread out, Hunt said. "I just really wanted some music to happen," she said.

Students who are learning

remotely participate over Zoom. Hunt records videos of herself playing so students can follow along when they practice.

"It's a good stop-gap. I would hate to teach this way all the time," Hunt said, saying she misses the energy of making music in person. "But, somehow or other, the kids are making progress."

Mills still hasn't researched guidelines that could make it safe to sing, but he'd love to conduct a choir. There are masks for singers that cover most of the face, with extra room to breathe and push the air out, he said.

In addition, Mills got a \$300 grant from the North Central Education Foundation to purchase

microphones that allow students learning remotely to record their part at home while listening to a track that sets the tempo. Playing to a recorded track adds another challenge because, when you're live, you can adjust to what's happening in the moment, Mills said. Students in the classroom are also recording their parts, which Mills will assemble for their virtual concert.

While not being able to give an in-person concert is disappointing, students will get a CD of their performance to take home, Mills said.

"I wanted the safest options for students. We're trying to set the bar, as one of the few schools open" for in-person instruction, Mills said.

Sorting out the score on high school music

Many states have restrictions on playing wind instruments or singing because of two choir rehearsals in Skagit County in March that resulted in an alarming number of COVID-19 cases — about three-fourths of the attendees (mostly older adults) became sick.

A study of the outbreak published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) concluded that COVID "transmission was likely facilitated by close proximity (within 6 feet) during practice.... The act of singing, itself, might have contributed to transmission through emission of aerosols, which is affected by loudness of vocalization," they said.

Since then, there's been research that looks specifically at the role of aerosols in COVID transmission for wind instruments and singers. The research, which is still ongoing, is being conducted at the University of Colorado and the University of Maryland. It was supported by the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) and the National Association for Music Education (NAfME), plus 125 performing-arts organizations.

The aerosol study recommends masks and bell covers with a special filter for wind players. It also recommends 6-foot separation between students — and 9 feet for trombones — and a maximum of 30 minutes for rehearsals. It recommends that singers wear masks at all times.

Different interpretations

But understanding of the guidelines for music instruction in Washington appears to vary, depending on the agency or level of involvement with school music programs.

Ginny Streeter, a communications consultant with the state Department of Health (DOH), said last week, "Choir and band activities are and remain prohibited in our current guidance. While we understand these co-curriculars are important to students, these activities (especially indoors) carry an elevated risk of COVID-19 spread. As we continue to learn more about the risks and possible mitigation measures, we will update our guidance and recommendations."

While many decisions are left up to individual school districts — including how and when to resume in-person instruction, Streeter said, "There are certain guidelines that they must follow and this is one of them."

But the most-recent DOH guidance for K-12 schools, issued Dec. 3, lists "distancing strategies" that schools may consider to minimize risk, Methow Valley School District Supt. Tom Venable said. These include canceling in-person activities such as choir,

playing wind instruments, or activities that require students to remove face coverings. Since the guidelines describe potentially "canceling" these activities, it's clear that they're permissible, Venable said.

In its October guidance for K-12 schools, the CDC also suggests considering distancing, bell covers, small groups of students, and outdoor rehearsals to minimize risk in music classes.

The school district has given considerable thought to how to teach music safely, including distancing, proper hygiene and not sharing instruments, Venable said. Liberty Bell High School music teacher David Mills is following appropriate guidelines with his jazz band by using masks and bell covers, small groups, and playing outside whenever possible — even in December, Venable said.

One of the reasons Methow schools have been so successful in preventing COVID transmission is the willingness of staff and students to comply with COVID precautions, Venable said.

"We believe, as evidenced by our recent and ongoing testing results, that our strategies are working. In every situation, including jazz band, we're acting with an abundance of caution," he said.

Petition

The Washington Music Educators Association (WMEA) would like the state's guidelines to take into account the fall 2020 recommendations from the aerosol study and is encouraging its members to sign a petition to the state. While the recommendations don't replace guidelines from public health departments, the WMEA encourages states to take the new research into account.

The petition came about because DOH was recommending the cancellation of most music classes, WMEA Executive Director Scott Ketron said. The state's guidance has endangered music programs and positions, when music is a way for some kids to maintain interest in school, he said.

"Simply, the petition asks the decision makers to reference and use the guidelines in the NFHS/NAfME document if and when our schools reopen. That is all," WMEA said in a letter to its members.

They emphasized that the petition doesn't rush in-person learning or declare that it's safe. It also doesn't deny the need for safety protocols like distancing and masks, WMEA said.

The petition, with about 2,000 signatures, has been submitted to Gov. Jay Inslee and DOH, Ketron said. The state hasn't responded yet.

NOMA

From Page A1

where cases are unfiled, trials are delayed, or even dismissed or lost due to lack of personnel," Noma said.

Personal, racially motivated attacks

Noma noted that criticism of any public office is merited, but he decried "undue attacks on this office and its leaders, including racially motivated attacks that are un-equivocally un-American," he said. "I routinely received vile attacks about my race, ancestry, and even the color of my skin."

Noma said that his home and minor children have been watched and his vehicles followed and photographed. He said a Facebook page had been set up "for the sole purpose of harassing my home, family, voters, and friends that supported me."

Noma accused people on the Facebook page of referring to him sarcastically and disrespectfully as a "man" (in quotation marks) or with the "well-known racial epithet 'boy.'" He asserted that none of his white predecessors ever experienced similar attacks on social media.

"It should go without saying that social media use to pub-

lically [sic] disseminate my vehicle information, the location of my town and neighborhood, and instructions to find my address in order to locate my home was utterly inappropriate, potentially dangerous, caused my family fear and anxiety, and by any rational or ethical standard, is completely out of bounds," Noma said.

"The combination of an impossible institutional task and an utterly dehumanizing work context makes my tenure as your prosecutor untenable," Noma said, noting that it had been an honor to serve the county's citizens.

A Facebook page called "No More Noma" was set up this past summer to "educate the citizens regarding Prosecutor Noma's inability to provide justice and safety to Okanogan County," according to the page. Posts by the unidentified page administrators alleged that Noma was rarely on the job and that he mistreated and belittled his staff and was unprofessional in court.

The page claimed that Noma's reforms, which they said had reduced jail numbers to an all-time low, would be obvious to people "when the same criminals are burglarizing your house, murdering your loved ones or raping small children."



Arian Noma

The organizers of the page pointedly put the title "Prosecutor" and "man" in quotation marks when referring to Noma. In an August posting, they said, "Then, this 'man' has the audacity to proclaim deficiencies because of budget and lack of funding." In September, they posted, "from this point forward we will no longer use 'Prosecutor' for Arian. We will only use Arian; not even Noma as utilizing a last name denotes some sort of respect."

This summer, the Facebook page said Noma had described himself as "African American" at a Black Lives Matter rally and accused him of being a "chameleon blending in to whatever group he can to gain trust."

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